

Twenty-First Century Problems in a First Century Church (1 Corinthians 5-7)

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Introduction

The book of 1 Corinthians, written in the middle of the first century, is amazingly relevant. From the standpoint of pastoral ministry it may be the most contemporary of Paul's letters. Many pastors only think they have a difficult church until they read 1 Corinthians. How could a church started by the apostle Paul be fractured by divisions, filled with arrogance, seemingly supportive of immorality, involved in litigation, and struggling over whether sexual relations are appropriate within the husband-wife relationship? These are just a few of the problems facing Paul as he seeks to deal with his spiritual children in Corinth (not to mention abuses of the Lord's Supper, the abuse of Christian freedom, and doctrinal controversies over such issues as spiritual gifts and the future bodily resurrection of believers). The subjects Paul confronts are as relevant to the body of Christ today as when Paul wrote the letter. Although no church I know of is dealing with all of these problems simultaneously, every church faces similar difficulties. As the book is studied one observes how Paul—the consummate pastor and theologian—handles delicate issues with a spiritually immature people. He provides the contemporary church with a compass to guide her through the stormy seas of church discipline, internal conflict, and aberrant doctrine. What is clear throughout is that Paul loved the church and

desired her to bring glory to God and be a source of light in the midst of a spiritually dark city.

The world is looking for authenticity. They want to see individual believers and churches that practice what they preach—purity of life, brotherly love, and healthy relationships in the home. Paul's first century advice provides a healthy message to twenty-first century churches.

The Setting of Chapters 5-6

In chapters 5-6 Paul deals with moral sins affecting the church. The sins Paul confronts are issues that were reported to him by Chloe's people (1:11). The church at Corinth struggled with problems stemming from spiritual immaturity, arrogance, and a lack of concern for corporate holiness. The shocking absence of corporate discipline in the church is seen by its apparent condoning of a case of incest (5:1-13). They manifested an attitude of arrogance in their handling, or more precisely, their lack of handling of this sin. This arrogant spirit was part of the reason for the factionalism manifested in the church (1:10-4:21). The church also failed to comprehend who they were in Christ and God's call for corporate holiness, as well as the dangerous consequences of not dealing with the fallen "brother." Paul directs the church to handle the situation by exercising corporate discipline for the purpose of restoration.

A failure to love one another and a lack of concern for the testimony of the church in the world is seen by the practice of believers going to court against other believers, and this before the ungodly (6:1-11). It was serious enough to have significant disagreements in the church, but then to settle them by litigation in a civil setting compounded the problem. Paul advises those involved to be willing to lay down their rights for the sake of the gospel. The type of mindset reflecting concern about oneself regardless of the potential cost to the kingdom also manifests itself in sexual immorality (6:12-20). Paul argues for sexual purity because of the dignity and destiny of the body.

The Sin of Incest (1 Cor 5:1-13)

The particular problems Paul addresses and his proposed solution in this chapter are not hard to identify. Unraveling some of the details, however, is more problematic. Moreover, trying to understand how the passage applies to the contemporary church is even more difficult.

The chapter can be divided into three major sections. In the opening two verses Paul describes the situation. In the second section he recommends that the sinful man must be removed (vv. 3-8). In the chapter's final division he clarifies a matter he addressed in a prior letter to the Corinthians (vv. 9-13).

The Situation Confronted— A Case of Incest (5:1-2)

In reality there are two problems. The first problem is a report of "sexual immorality" (*porneia*). This word is a general term for sexual sin.¹ Paul makes it clear that the specific sin in this context is incest. Apparently the relationship was ongoing ("someone has [*echein*] his father's wife"). It is not

possible to determine from the context if the father is alive or dead. This type of incestuous relationship is forbidden in the Old Testament (Lev 18:18). Paul is also outraged at the haughty response of the church to the sin. Rather than mourning over such an egregious act, the church is "arrogant."² The text is unclear about the relationship between the arrogance and the act. Suggestions usually go in one of two directions: either (1) some form of incipient Gnosticism that emphasized a false dualism between the spirit and the body or (2) an extreme form of Christian liberty. In light of chapters eight through eleven the latter is to be preferred. Paul's solution to the sin of incest is to remove the man (apparently the woman was not a professing believer) from the fellowship.

The Action to Be Taken— "Clean Out the Old Leaven" (5:3-8)

In the center section of this chapter Paul expounds on the latter part of verse 2, "the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst." While Paul may not be physically present with them, he is with them in spirit and his intentions are revealed in the letter. His use of the perfect tense verb translated, "pass judgment" (*kekrika*) communicates a sense of finality to his judgment. Commentators agree that Paul is commanding some form of discipline such as excommunication to take place. The specific nature of the discipline is more difficult to determine.

The major interpretative crux is what Paul means by "to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5). Most agree that Paul intends the handing over to Satan (cf. 1 Tim 1:20) to be understood to mean to put the culprit out of the church and back into the

realm dominated by Satan.³ What is less clear is how one is to interpret the phrase “for (*eis*) the destruction of the flesh.”

The phrase should probably be understood as a result clause and the final phrase, “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus,” as a purpose clause. This understanding of the grammar suggests that the handing over (being put out of the fellowship and back into Satan’s domain) would result in the destruction of the flesh with the explicit aim of final redemption (that his spirit may be saved).⁴

What Paul means by “the destruction of the flesh” is debated. Many commentators understand Paul’s reference to refer to physical suffering and possibly even death.⁵ This interpretation takes the word “destruction” (*olethron*) in its most regular meaning. Further support for this interpretation is found in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (“many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” as a result of abuses at the Lord’s Table) and Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira).

Several arguments, however, can be put forth against the view that Paul is referring to the man’s physical death.⁶ First, nowhere else in the Pauline corpus does Paul use the phrase “the destruction of the flesh” as a reference to death. Second, the phrase stands in contrast to the following clause, “saving of the spirit.” When Paul contrasts flesh and spirit he is not referring to body versus soul, but rather to the old versus new nature of a believer.⁷ Third, in 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul describes handing two men over to Satan so that they may be taught not to blaspheme, so apparently he was not anticipating them dying immediately. Paul’s purpose in the action was corrective. Fourth, Paul further instructs them not to have close fellowship with the man after he is put out of the church, suggest-

ing that an abrupt death is not in view.

The evidence supports the conclusion that Paul is not thinking of the man’s death. His objective was that the man be put out of the church, resulting in the destruction of his “fleshly” nature, in order that he might be saved eschatologically.⁸

In verses 6-8 Paul uses the imagery of Passover to underscore the exigency of removing the “leaven” from among them. Their arrogant response to the situation revealed their failure to see the gravity of the circumstances and the potential danger of this sin contaminating the entire body.

Straightening Out a Misunderstanding (5:9-13)

The final verses of the chapter (vv. 9-13) are intended to clear up a misunderstanding from a “previous letter” by Paul to the Corinthians.⁹ The Corinthians thought he was instructing them in this earlier letter not to associate with immoral non-Christians (v. 9); however, Paul’s intention was that they not associate closely (do “not even eat”) with anyone who claims to be a believer but denies their relationship to Christ by their lifestyle (vv. 10-11). Paul concludes his discussion by getting back to the main point of putting the incestuous man out of the congregation (v. 13).

Church discipline is a foreign concept to the modern church. One of the reasons for this is past abuses. Another reason is a sincere hesitancy about being unduly judgmental. John 3:16 is no longer the best-known verse of our day. It has been replaced by Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.” This is not only to misunderstand what Jesus is saying (since he compared some people to pigs and dogs just a few verses following!), but it is to ignore Paul’s clear instruction that

the church has a responsibility to judge those within (5:12). The judgmentalism Jesus condemned has to do with being nit-picky and unnecessarily critical (pointing out the speck in another's character). The discipline that Paul teaches here is for the purpose of restoration. It is not intended as a means of getting even or teaching someone a lesson. Rather, the practice of church discipline reveals the seriousness of sin and the consequences of rejecting God's standards. A multitude of questions arise when the topic of church discipline is mentioned such as, "Which sins are serious enough to merit it?" This topic is beyond the scope of this brief exegetical article. *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, however, devoted an entire issue to the topic and that would be a good place to start investigating the subject.¹⁰

The passage also teaches the inseparability of theology and ethics: who believers are in Christ is inseparable from how they should live. Their decision not to deal with the "sinner" reflects their failure to see themselves as a "new lump." It is because the church is a holy people that individual believers are called to live holy lives and the church must hold each one accountable. The church has been purchased by the death of the Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ. Therefore, our lifestyle is to reflect his holy standards.

Litigation between Christians before Unbelievers—

"What Are You Doing?" (6:1-11)

Chapters five and six are not as different as they first appear. Paul asserts in chapter five that the church has a duty to judge those within its membership, while it is God who judges those outside the church. He now rebukes the church for permitting two believers to submit per-

sonal grievances for judgment before the unconverted. The basis for Paul's anger is twofold: first, the church again fails to understand who they are in Christ, seen in their permitting such an action to take place; and second, the litigation damages the community's gospel witness.

A Rebuke — "How Could You?" (6:1-6)¹¹

Paul's agitation with the Corinthians is revealed in the series of rhetorical questions put to them in the first five verses of the chapter. Paul's point is not that believers would not receive a fair hearing before a civil magistrate, but that believers involved in litigation within the community have no business being there.¹² The church again failed to understand their identity in Christ. They are an eschatological community, indwelt by the Spirit and they should be capable of handling these matters themselves.

Paul uses their eschatological destiny to demonstrate that they should be competent to handle matters related to this life. While in this life they are not to judge outsiders, at the end of the age they will be involved in the final judgment of unbelievers (v. 2). The possible background for this thought is Daniel 7:22, where judgment is given to the saints of the "Most High."¹³ Paul strengthens his argument further by making reference to believers judging angels (v. 3). This concept is not found elsewhere in Scripture (it is possible that it came directly to Paul by a revelation from the Lord). His point, however, is that if they will one day judge beings as glorious as angels, they should be capable of handling everyday affairs—such as money, land, or business.

The NASB translation of verse 4 is to be preferred over the NIV translation.¹⁴ The

NIV translation interprets the verse to mean that the least capable Christian is preferable to a non-Christian to judge between the two involved in the litigation. A more likely interpretation, however, is that Paul has constructed an analogous question to verse 2b, in which he formulates an “if . . . then” clause concluding in a rhetorical question.¹⁵ Paul uses irony in verse 5 as an instrument to shame those in the church who were so proud of their wisdom (cf. 4:10).

***A Radical Solution—
Lay Down Your Rights! (6:7-8)***

Paul concentrates in verses 7 and 8 on those involved in the court proceeding and suggests an alternative means of handling the dispute. They need to understand that a lawsuit between believers was already a defeat. Something is fundamentally wrong in the lives of those who allow an issue to reach this point; however, if it does reach this point a believer must be prepared to bear the wrong (Matt 5:39-42). Laying down one’s rights for the propagation of the gospel is as foreign to the contemporary church as it was to the church at Corinth. The two verbs Paul uses, “be wronged” (*adikeisthe*) and “be cheated” (*apostereisthe*), are in the middle/passive voice suggesting that it is better to bear injustice than to damage the witness of the gospel.¹⁶ The passage does not directly address the appropriateness of a believer entering into litigation with an unbeliever; however, in our litigious culture it should probably be considered only as a last resort. Fee suggests that it is justified only “if it is out of concern for the one defrauded and for all others who might be taken in.”¹⁷

***A Warning—
Beware of Self-Deception (6:9-11)***

The connection between verses 1-8 and verses 9-11 is that the mindset that refuses to lay aside one’s rights for the gospel is similar to the mindset of those who commit the sins set forth in this vice list.¹⁸ The self-indulgence and self-centeredness of the sins enumerated here are not unlike the disposition of those involved in the litigation. Paul’s warning should be understood seriously; however, he is not referring to isolated and temporary acts, but rather a way of life that is the focus of one’s attentions and affections. Paul’s warning is analogous to those in Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 5:3-7. Paul was concerned that those who profess to know Christ but practice wickedness not be deceived into believing that they are Christians.

Paul concludes this section on a positive note. Some of the Corinthians had been guilty of these sins before they were converted. Verse 11 is one of Paul’s more noteworthy theological statements in the book. The three verbs each present a separate facet of salvation. “Washed” could refer to baptism,¹⁹ but more likely refers to the inward washing of the Holy Spirit that took place at regeneration (Titus 3:5).²⁰ He goes on to say that they were made holy (“sanctified”) and declared righteous (“justified”). While these statements express the Pauline indicative, the Pauline imperative is clear by implication. They are not to live like those who do not know Christ (vv. 9-10). Their lives should reflect what God has done for them and in them. He has cleansed them from their past transgressions. He has begun the work of conforming them into the image of Jesus Christ. They now stand before God forgiven and declared righteous.

While Paul was specifically addressing the issue of two believers going to court against one another, the implications for

the twenty-first century are numerous. In a society that is becoming more and more prone to enter into litigation, a believer must take a sober look at Paul's instruction. Believers must seek some type of Christian arbitration rather than going to court against one another. Christians must also be willing to pray and think seriously about whether a suit against even an unbeliever may not do damage to the proclamation of the gospel. Furthermore, the contemporary "needs driven" church should once again live out Christ's radical call to discipleship, "If anyone wishes to come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." This involves putting to death sin (vv. 9-10) and living a life that reflects what God has done inside each believer (v. 11). God's call is for men and women who have trusted in Jesus Christ to live holy lives in an unholy world.

***Christian Freedom Abused—
"Glorify God with Your Bodies!"
(6:12-20)***

Paul warned the Corinthians in verse 9 against the danger of deception and then began to address the subject of impurity. Paul now addresses the issue of sexual immorality even more pointedly, especially sexual intercourse with a prostitute. Apparently some men of the libertine branch of the Corinthian church were engaging in sexual relations with prostitutes. This was likely a common practice among many of the men before they were saved out of paganism. Paul quotes what appear to be slogans from this libertine segment of the church (vv. 12-13a). The quotations possible originated with Paul, but the libertines were grossly misconstruing them. After stating the slogans Paul qualifies them significantly. It is difficult to be certain where the last slogan ends and Paul's qualifica-

tion begins. His point, however, is clear: the body is for the Lord's service, which is demonstrated by our resurrection and the Lord's (vv. 13b-14).

Paul's argument in verses 15-17 is that the use of the body in sexual immorality takes it away from its rightful Lord. He constructs his argument on a theological foundation. The Corinthians did not comprehend that conversion to Christ means being united to Him (v. 17). They failed also to understand that sexual immorality is more than just a mere physical act, but involves the entire person (Gen 2:24). The conclusion is that it is abhorrent for a believer, who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, to engage in sexual immorality.

Paul concludes his argument in verses 18-20 by giving them another command and the theological basis for obeying it. He commands them to "flee" sexual temptation (*porneia*).²¹ Paul knows that God has placed within people a sexual drive. The devil's strategy is to get them to meet that God-given drive in a God forbidden way: premarital, extramarital, or perverted sex.²² The theological foundation for the exhortation is in verses 19 and 20. Paul is essentially making a statement by his use of a rhetorical question in verse 19. Apparently they have once again forgotten who they are in Christ. Those indwelt by the Spirit of God have no business engaging in sexual relations with a prostitute (or for that matter anyone else outside of marriage). The blood of Jesus Christ has bought them and their lives, including their sex lives, are not their own.

Paul's words need to be heard afresh in a culture that has legitimized sexual promiscuity. In contrast to the contemporary mantra, "if it feels good do it," comes the wise words of the apostle Paul, "Flee immorality!" Jesus' counsel, although he

was using hyperbole, is even more descriptive: “If your right eye causes you to stumble tear it out and throw it from you” (Matt 5:29a). Jesus’ language is graphic and understandable. The believer must deal with the source of sexual temptation in a radical manner. Sexual immorality is dangerous: (1) it destroys families; (2) it erodes a person’s ability to truly love another; (3) it degrades people and turns them into objects; and (4) it can become an obsessive addiction. As addiction to Internet pornography proliferates and premarital, extramarital, and perverted sex become increasingly the norm, the obvious application is for the believer to do whatever it takes to remain pure in mind and body. The greatest motivation to this purity is not first and foremost one’s own well being, but to glorify the God who bought us.

This passage also sets forth one of the strongest arguments in the Pauline corpus for the dignity and destiny of the body. Paul makes five points in verses 13b-20 related to the body. (1) In v. 13b he states that the body is for the Lord’s service. What we do with our bodies is not unimportant. Sexual promiscuity is inappropriate for one whose body is dedicated to the Lord for kingdom service. (2) Paul states in verse 14 that God has destined our bodies for resurrection. A body that is to be glorified by God should not be used for immorality. (3) His most developed argument is in verses 15-18. His main thought is that the believer’s body is a member of Christ’s body. Believers must recognize their union with Christ and how shameful it would be to then be “joined” to a prostitute. (4) The most impressive argument is in verse 19—the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is why it is so important to flee sexual immorality. (5) The final thought on the dignity and destiny of the body is that the believer’s body

is to be an instrument for glorifying God.

Celibacy, Sexless Marriages, Divorce, Virgins, and Widows (7:1-40)

Chapter seven begins the second major section of 1 Corinthians. In the first section of the epistle Paul deals with the factionalism (1:10-4:21) and the serious moral problems endangering the church (5:1-6:20). He turns his attention now to issues that were addressed to him in a letter from the Corinthians. The first matter he takes up is a number of issues related to celibacy and marriage. Before one plunges into the particulars of the passage, there are a couple of points that need to be kept in mind. First, Paul was not writing a general treatise on marriage but dealing with specific issues relevant to the Corinthians. Some significant aspects of marriage that Paul considered important are not mentioned here because they were not germane to the Corinthian’s situation (cf. Eph 5: 22-33). Second, we cannot always be sure of the exact question(s) being asked by the Corinthians. Studying this chapter is like listening to one side of a two-sided phone conversation. We hear only Paul’s responses and can only guess as to what the specific question(s) might have been.

Celibacy versus Marriage (7:1-9)

The two main approaches to the interpretation of 7:1-9 are: (1) to understand Paul to be giving some general principles on marriage, or (2) to see him addressing the more specific issues of celibacy and sexual relations within marriage. The second approach seems preferable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot also discover in the passage some legitimate principles for the marriage relationship. As the passage is studied one must keep in

mind that the situation Paul confronts here is worlds apart from the modern mindset. Some in the church were confident that celibacy was more “spiritual” than being married. Indeed, they took it even further in suggesting that abstaining from sexual relations within marriage was more pleasing to God than engaging in sexual relations with one’s spouse. It is clear that, although Paul personally preferred singleness, he did not believe that to be married was a sin.²³

Scholars are divided on how 7:1b should be interpreted. The NIV, KJV, and RSV interpret it as a Pauline teaching; but in all probability it should be interpreted as either a Corinthian slogan or position advocating abstaining from sex within marriage or possibly even encouraging celibacy.²⁴ The verb translated “to touch” (*haptesthai*) is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Paul’s qualification of “the slogan” in verses 2-5 is that marriage is to be a monogamous relationship (v. 2, “each man is to have his own wife and each woman her own husband”) that involves physical responsibilities on both parties (vv. 3-5). Any departure from normal sexual relations within marriage must be by mutual consent, for a limited time and a specific purpose. The “concession” Paul makes in v. 6 is to allow a couple to abstain from sexual relations for a limited time in order to devote themselves to prayer, but even that (abstaining from sexual relations for a brief season) is not a command.

Paul’s preference is for singleness (7:7-8, 26, 28, 32-35, 37-38, 40). This was an unusual position for a first century Jew. The more common view was that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18-25). Yet, Paul makes it clear that those who marry do not sin (7:7b, 9, 28, 36, 38-39). Paul indicates that both marriage and singleness are a “gift”

from God (7:7a). One of the most important dynamics in determining whether to marry or not is to ask, “Will it encourage total devotion to the Lord?” (v. 35). Although this passage’s specific purpose is not to set forth general principles concerning marriage, Paul’s thoughts here do provide some helpful insights. First, marriage is to be a monogamous relationship between one man and one woman (7:2). There is a spiritual, emotional, and physical exclusivity about marriage. Second, marriage requires each partner to meet selflessly the sexual needs of his or her mate. In the ancient world it was rare for one to emphasize that a mutuality of responsibility existed within marriage. Paul stresses that both the husband and the wife have a responsibility to meet the other’s sexual needs (7:3-5). Third, in light of Paul’s teaching in these opening verses, more needs to be done in premarital and marital counseling to communicate the significance of sexual relations within marriage. Studies continually reveal that one of the primary causes of divorce and dissatisfaction in marriage can be traced to this issue. Fourth, a decision about marriage should be made in light of one’s gift from God (7:7-9). Therefore, those who are married should never look down on those who are single.

Remain Married or Divorce? **(7:10-24)**

As mentioned above, some in the church of Corinth were teaching that refraining from physical relations within marriage pleased God. It appears that some in the church took the next step, reasoning that divorcing their partner would bring more glory to God than remaining married. Those married to unbelievers may have been especially attracted to this reasoning. They may have been apprehensive that not

only was their marriage dishonoring to God but that their unbelieving mate might defile them. This section falls into two parts: verses 10-11 deal with marriages in which both husband and wife are Christians and verses 12-16 deal with marriages where one partner is a believer and the other partner is unconverted.

*Is Divorce Permissible in Marriages
Where Both Partners Are Believers?
(7:10-11)*

It appears that a pro-celibacy group within the church advocated the dissolution of marriages in order to live a celibate life. The issue Paul deals with in these verses can be stated in the form of a question: Is divorce acceptable in a marriage where both partners are believers?²⁵ Paul reminds them of the Lord's instruction; however, he does not specifically state it here. Paul's response is that if they do divorce their only options are to remain unmarried or be reconciled to their estranged spouse.²⁶

*Is Divorce Permissible in Marriages in
Which One Partner Is a Believer and the
Other an Unbeliever? (7:12-16)*

This second situation Paul confronts is more complex. He addresses couples where one spouse is a Christian and the other a pagan. Possibly the ascetic wing (pro-celibacy) of the church warned those believers married to unbelievers of the "danger" (spiritual defilement) when having sexual relations with their unbelieving partner.

Paul first addresses the circumstance where a Christian is married to an unbeliever and the unbelieving spouse wants to continue in the marriage relationship. Paul's inspired council ("To the rest I say, not the Lord") is that the Christian is not

to take the initiative in severing this union (vv. 12-13). Paul's rationale for this counsel is found in verse 14. Paul reassures them that Christians are not defiled by their marriage to a non-Christian ("For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified [*hēgiastai*] by the wife . . ."). His words have resulted in a bewildering number of interpretations as to how the unbelieving spouse could be sanctified. The more likely interpretation is that Paul is making reference to the marriage. The biblical principle that the two will become one flesh is true even in this type of marriage. Consequently the children that are the product of this one-flesh union are not unclean.²⁷

If the unbelieving spouse is truly determined to end the marriage, however, the believing partner should opt for peace and acquiesce. Paul gives three reasons why the believer is to consent to the divorce. First, the believer is not in bondage (v. 15a).²⁸ Second, in verse 15b God has called the believer "in peace" (to live in harmony with others). Third, an unhappy, strife-torn marriage is not likely to result in the conversion of the non-Christian partner.²⁹

*Paul's Guiding Principle—“Remain as
You Are” (7:17-24)*

These verses are not a digression having to do with circumcision and slavery. Rather, they are closely related to Paul's overall discussion. The passage works like a bridge by providing the theological principle that has guided Paul's answers in verses 1-16 and that will be applied also in verses 25-40. The principle may be summed up in this way: Conversion to Christ results in an essential change in one's ethical and spiritual life, but it does not necessarily change one's earthly status. In fact, it is usually better "to remain as you are" (vv. 2, 8, 10, 11, 12-16, 26-27, 37, 40),

that is, be content in your current status. If married, that relationship should not be ended. If single, one should not too quickly enter into marriage. Paul states this general principle in verses 17, 20, and 24 and then applies the principle in verses 18-19 (circumcision) and 21-23 (slavery).

To Marry or Not Marry? (7:25-40)

At this point Paul begins to address again, in a more direct way, issues of marriage and sex in response to the ascetic (pro-celibacy) wing of the church. Paul's instructions are primarily directed to those who have never married, except for his comments to widows in verses 39-40.

Some Advantages to Singleness (7:25-35)

Paul sets forth the nature of his instruction in verse 25. His teaching on the following matter does not come as a direct word from the Lord (cf. 7:12). Nevertheless, he believes his advice to be trustworthy. Paul's reference to virgins (v. 25) should probably be understood as referring to young people of marriageable age.³⁰ His focus in this passage is on some advantages to singleness.³¹

The substance of Paul's advice is set forth in three thoughts in 7:26-35. Some believe that a current crisis in Corinth limits Paul's counsel to that particular setting (vv. 26b, 29a); however, it is better to understand Paul as referring to the difficulties of living a holy life in an evil age as one awaits Christ's second coming. In light of this, Paul first recommends that they not change their marital status (vv. 26-27); however, in verse 28 he reminds them that whether they do marry or remain single they do not sin. Second, he advises them to live with a certain detachment from this world (vv. 29-31). All believers, married

and single, must serve their Lord wholeheartedly. Those married must be careful that they do not use their families as an excuse not to serve the Lord. Paul gives another advantage to a life of singleness in verses 32-34. Those who are married find their attention divided between serving the Lord and caring for their family, but the one who is single is concerned only with service to the Lord. Paul again does not want to give the impression that he believes everyone should choose the path of singleness. The ultimate principle as to whether one should marry or remain single is whichever lifestyle enables one to serve the Lord most fully (v. 35).³²

Advice for Those Engaged to Marry (7:36-38)

The language in verses 36-38 is vague enough that it can be interpreted in several different ways. The most critical question involves the relationship between the "man" and the "virgin." The least likely interpretation, advocated by the New English Bible, is that Paul is addressing couples living in a "spiritual marriage" (without physical relations). This interpretation understands Paul's words as suggesting that if they consummate their marriage they will not have sinned. A major argument against this position is the fact that it contradicts Paul's clear teaching in verse 5. Another argument against it is that there is no evidence of this practice ("spiritual marriages") before the second century. A second interpretation is that Paul is advising Christian fathers about whether or not to allow their virgin daughters to marry (NASB). Paul's language in verse 37 seems odd if he is addressing a father struggling over whether to give his daughter in marriage. The third view is preferable. In this view

Paul is addressing a couple engaged to be married (NIV). In light of the teaching by ascetics in the church it is reasonable to assume that couples engaged to be married would wonder whether it might not be more spiritual not to marry. In light of the previous discussion Paul is advising them that if they marry they will not sin, but they might be happier if they remain single.

Advice to Widows: You Are Free to Remarry—If You Must (7:39-40)

Paul concludes this chapter with advice to widows (and widowers). He begins by affirming God's desire for marriage to be a life-long commitment between a man and a woman (v. 39a). If one's mate dies, the surviving spouse is free to remarry in the Lord (cf. 1 Tim 5:14). Paul concludes by suggesting that the widow (or widower) might be happier, however, if she remains single.

Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 5-7 Paul demonstrates tremendous pastoral wisdom and theological insight. His words to Corinth are an example of handling practical issues with theological conviction. Possibly even more helpful than the pastoral wisdom displayed in these chapters is the integration of theology and ethics established by Paul. The integration of theology (indicative) and ethics (imperative) is prominent throughout these chapters, but especially chapters five and six. The church must understand who they are (the indicative: "...so that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened"), the danger of doing nothing ("Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"), and the necessity of disciplining the incestuous man (the imperative: "Remove the wicked man...").

So while we might like to know more about the process of church discipline set forth in chapter five, Paul does provide a sure theological foundation for the practice of it.

The same blending of theology and ethics is true in chapter six with the matter of litigation between believers. Those involved in litigation must renounce their legal rights (the imperative: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?") because they are part of the family of God (the indicative: "and brother goes to law with brother.... You do this even to your brethren"). Their eschatological destiny (indicative), as those who will one day judge unbelievers and angels, ought to inform them that they are capable of adjudicating among themselves (imperative). Furthermore, in 6:12-20 understanding what God has done for them in salvation (the indicative: washed, sanctified, justified [6:11], united with Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and purchased by his blood [6:17, 19, 20]) is the greatest motivation to resisting the sins listed in 6:9-10 (the imperative).

The blending of ethics and theology is not quite as prominent in chapter seven as it is in chapters five and six; however, it is not completely absent either. The reason for a lesser emphasis in chapter seven probably has to do more with the specific questions Paul answers. One example of the binding together of the indicative and the imperative is in Paul's admonitions in 7:1-7 concerning sexual obligations in the marriage relationship. The imperative is that the husband and wife are to make sure that they meet one another's sexual needs. Paul's reasoning is that the husband and wife do not have authority over their own body but their mate does. His logic is built on what he wrote earlier (6:16b), where he quoted Genesis 2:24, "The two shall

become one flesh" (the indicative).

We see the apostle Paul at his best as a pastor and theologian in these chapters. He is helping the church understand their true identity and how that understanding determines their behavior. The world is looking for authenticity, men and women who know what they believe and how those beliefs affect their choices. In these chapters, Paul provides a reliable guide for putting faith and practice into action.

ENDNOTES

¹W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 854.

²For the view that that Paul is using the Hebrew concept of "corporate responsibility" and calling the church to repent as if they had committed the sinful act, see Brian Rosner, "OUCHI MALLON EPENTHĒZATE: Corporate Responsibility in 1 Corinthians 5," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992) 472.

³Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 209.

⁴Ibid. See also James T. South, "A Critique of the 'Curse/Death' Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5:1-8," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993) 539-561.

⁵Leon Morris, *The Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 88-89; death is the only option given in BDAG, 702; Schneider, "olethros," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 5:169.

⁶For a more thorough explanation of the

arguments against the "death" view see Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 210-213.

⁷See the helpful article by Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Meaning of SARX in 1 Corinthians 5:5: A Fresh Approach in Light of Logical and Semantic Factors," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26 (1973) 204-228.

⁸Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 212.

⁹This letter has not been preserved for posterity.

¹⁰*The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 no. 4 (Winter 2000). See also J. Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985).

¹¹See H. Wayne House, "Reconciling Disputes among Christians," in *Christian Ministries and the Law: What Church and Para-Church Leaders Should Know*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 79-88.

¹²For a discussion on the possible social factors involved in this passage see Alan C. Mitchell, "Rich and Poor in the Courts of Corinth: Litigiousness and Status in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993) 562-586.

¹³Other related texts include: A statement found in the "Q" material, Matt 19:28/Luke 22:30; Rev 20:4; 1 QpHab V, 4; Wis 3:7-8; 1 Enoch 1:9.

¹⁴6:4a is a conditional sentence with *ean* plus the subjunctive in the protasis. The NIV reads, "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!" The NASB reads, "So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?"

¹⁵C. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 117.

¹⁶The two verbs are either a permissive

middle or a causative/permissive passive. For a discussion of the two options see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 427, 440.

¹⁷Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 238.

¹⁸See C. G. Kruse, "Virtues and Vices," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, and Daniel Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 962-963.

¹⁹George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 162-167.

²⁰See discussion in Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 246-248. Another possibility is that it is not an "either-or" but rather a "both-and" situation as presented by Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 374.

²¹Paul gives the same advice about fleeing in regards to idolatry (1 Cor 10:14), materialism (1 Tim 6:11), and youthful lusts (2 Tim 2:22). Joseph is an example of one who fled when sexually tempted (Gen 39:10) and David is an example of one who failed to flee (2 Sam 11:2-4).

²²For the difficult phrase, "sins against his own body" see the article by Brendan Byrne, "Sinning Against One's Own Body: Paul's Understanding of the Sexual Relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983) 613. F. F. Bruce, quoting D. S. Bailey, notes, "[Paul] displays a psychological insight into human sexuality which is altogether exceptional

by first-century standards...he insists that it is an act which, by reason of its very nature, engages and expresses the whole personality in such a way as to constitute a unique mode of self-disclosure and self-commitment" (*1 and 2 Corinthians* [New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 64).

²³We have no way of ascertaining if Paul was ever married. Three different suggestions have been made concerning his marital status: (1) that he had been married but his wife left him after his conversion; (2) that he was a widower; and (3) that he never married.

²⁴Gordon D. Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (1980) 307-314; see also Fee's discussion in *1 Corinthians*, 266-357 and David Garland, "The Christian Posture toward Marriage and Celibacy: 1 Corinthians 7," *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983) 351.

²⁵Other passages in both testaments would need to be considered for a more complete understanding of the issue of divorce and remarriage. For an up-to-date discussion of the issue of divorce and remarriage, see William A. Heth, "Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed," and Gordon Wenham, "Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 no. 1 (Spring 2002) 4-29, and 30-45.

²⁶It is unusual that Paul mentions first the situation of a woman divorcing her husband. It may be that it was primarily women who were initiating these actions or who were rais-

ing questions as to the appropriateness of the divorce in this circumstance. It seems likely that Paul is making reference here to a spouse divorcing her mate without justification (i.e., adultery).

²⁷Garland, 355-356. Another possibility suggested by Blomberg (135) is that Paul is referring to spiritual blessings that come to the family because of the presence of a Christian partner and parent in the home.

²⁸See the articles by Heth and Wenham mentioned above on whether Paul permits remarriage or not to the believing partner. Also see Schreiner, 426-431.

²⁹Sake Kubo, "1 Corinthians VII.16: Optimistic or Pessimistic?" *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978) 539-544. Verse 16 can be interpreted in the opposite manner. I understand the passage to express doubt about the possibility of the non-Christian spouse's conversion. Others interpret it optimistically and suggest that it is giving hope that they will be converted. Those who interpret it optimistically understand verse 15a to be a parenthetical comment and verse 15b as giving further support for verses 12-14.

³⁰Blomberg, 151.

³¹One might conclude from what Paul writes in this chapter that he is an ascetic and is against marriage unless one cannot control his or her sexual drive. This is a clear misreading of Paul. Celibacy and asceticism should not be equated. Asceticism, in part, is an attempt to gain the pleasure of God by denying oneself the pleasures of life, which are given by God for his children to enjoy.

Paul himself renounces those who forbid marriage (1 Tim 4:3-5).

³²On a personal note: my service to the Lord is enhanced greatly by having my wife, Jaylynn, as my partner in ministry.